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26 November 2014

Mrs Mary Page
Headteacher
St Bernard's Catholic High School
Rating Lane
Barrow-in-Furness
Cumbria
LA13 9LE

Dear Mrs Page

Serious weaknesses monitoring inspection of St Bernard's Catholic High School

Following my visit to your school on 25 November 2014, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to confirm the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave during the inspection and for the time you made available to discuss the actions which have been taken since the school's previous monitoring inspection.

This was the second monitoring inspection since the school was judged to have serious weaknesses, following the section 5 inspection which took place in December 2013. The monitoring inspection report is attached.

Having considered all the evidence, I am of the opinion that at this time:

The school is making reasonable progress towards the removal of the serious weaknesses designation.

This letter and monitoring inspection report will be published on the Ofsted website. I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State, the Chair of the Governing Body, the Acting Corporate Director of Children's Services for Cumbria and the Director of the Education Service for the Diocese of Lancaster.

Yours sincerely

Aelwyn Pugh

Her Majesty's Inspector

Annex

The areas for improvement identified during the inspection which took place in December 2013

- Improve the quality of teaching so that it is at least good in all subjects, but most especially in English, by:
 - raising staff's expectations of what students can achieve and how their work should be presented
 - ensuring that teachers identify clearly the key concepts, skills and knowledge to be gained, and the steps which will ensure secure learning and progression
 - using information from assessment to ensure that all learning is at the right level of challenge, particularly for the most able students
 - sharing best practice in managing students' behaviour and in encouraging students to take greater responsibility for their own learning and behaviour
 - improving the quality of marking so students know exactly what they need to do to lift the quality of their work, and that effort and progress are being acknowledged.
- Accelerate students' progress in all subjects but most especially in English by:
 - raising the profile of English throughout the school and across the curriculum so that students see value in developing their speaking, listening, reading and writing skills and are motivated by seeing displays of high quality work from all year groups
 - identifying gaps and persistent weaknesses in students' reading and writing skills at year group, set and individual levels, and ensuring all staff take action to resolve them and narrow the achievement gap for those students supported by pupil premium funding
 - ensuring that members of the English department work effectively together to boost students' progress.
- Improve the impact of leadership at all levels in driving improvement by:
 - ensuring that all staff embrace the need for urgent change and readily implement agreed policies and practices
 - holding firmly to account all senior and middle leaders for students' progress, the quality of provision and the carrying through of development plans
 - injecting even more rigour, frequency and critical evaluation into the monitoring of teaching and its impact on students' learning.

Report on the second monitoring inspection on 25 November 2014

The inspector held meetings with the headteacher, the senior leadership team, the head of the English department, the Chair and members of the Governing Body and a representative from the diocese. He also held a telephone conversation with a representative from the local authority. With members of the senior leadership team, he conducted joint observations of parts of eight lessons, during which he spoke with students and looked at their books. He also held a meeting with 10 students, chosen at random from Years 7 to 11. He examined the single central record of staff and a range of documentation, including the school's self-evaluation, analyses of data, a sample of performance summaries and the updated action plan. He attended a house assembly, observed students as they moved around the school and spoke with members of staff.

Context

Since the first monitoring inspection, in June 2014, the school has appointed two deputy headteachers, two assistant headteachers and a mathematics teacher. It currently employs four supply staff, to cover two vacancies and two absences on maternity leave.

The quality of leadership and management at the school

Since the previous monitoring inspection, the leadership team has been restructured and extended, to include staff with a wide range of relevant skills which the headteacher is deploying to good effect.

The additional investment in pastoral support has led to a significant reduction in the instances of serious misbehaviour. The improved systems for gathering, collating and analysing data mean that the school now has an accurate picture of its strengths and weaknesses. This information is being used effectively to hold staff at every level to account and to plan the next stage in the improvement process.

The governors are very closely involved in the work of the school. They have a very clear strategy for the use of pupil premium funding (additional government money). The impact of the investments they have made in additional pastoral support and the appointment of achievement managers is reflected in the improvements in the progress and attainment of vulnerable students. The governors have also been very closely involved in monitoring the performance of individual departments and in holding them to account for their results. However, there is a need to be very clear about the lines of demarcation between governance and management.

Strengths in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- From discussions held during the monitoring inspection, it is clear that the reforms made since the section 5 inspection have led to a 'change of culture' in the school. Staff now have a shared determination to work together towards improvement.

- The most recent GCSE results show improvements in English as well as mathematics. The proportion of students achieving grades A* to C grades in five or more subjects, including English and mathematics, rose to 61%.
- A higher priority is being given to English and the strategies for extending students' reading skills are having a measureable effect.
- Since the previous monitoring inspection, the school has appointed a new head of the English department. Within a short time, she has identified very clear priorities and produced plans that focus closely on the areas for improvement identified in the last inspection. The department is still not fully staffed. However, students say that they no longer experience the discontinuity of staffing and teaching which they complained about during the first monitoring inspection.
- The standard of behaviour around the school is high. The increased emphasis on uniform means that students' appearance is invariably smart. They show a pride in themselves and are polite and helpful to each other and to visitors to the school.

Weaknesses in the school's approaches to securing improvement:

- In the lessons seen, most students worked with concentration. However, there were too many instances where individual students failed to follow instructions. For example, they would continue with their writing, even when they had been asked to put their pens down and listen to the teacher. There were also instances where students spent too much time staring around, with the result that they completed very little work. Teachers did not consistently tackle these issues.
- An examination of range of books shows that the school's marking policy is not being applied rigorously and presentation still needs further attention.
- Teachers do not place sufficient emphasis on improving the quality of oral work. As a result, students do not read aloud with fluency and they do not express their ideas with clarity.
- Teachers' use of questioning is limited. They rarely use supplementary questions to clarify or extend the students' thinking.

External support

The school is making good use of a range of support from the local authority, the diocese and the local teaching school. As the momentum for improvement increases, this support is being targeted more and more closely on specific areas of work.